

## From New Delhi by Ramtanu Maitra

### Nepal-Bangladesh transit — a new chapter

*The opening of a new facility through India indicates the emergence of good economic and political sense in the region.*

In August, Nepal and Bangladesh signed a transit agreement which will give land-locked Nepal access to the Mangla port for transshipment to Nepal and provide Nepal with access to the sea. The agreement, which assures Nepal transit through India, has finally opened up the possibility of linking up the nations of the subcontinent through trade routes.

This development, which, unfortunately, took 50 years to materialize, is in line with the requirements for building the Eurasian Land-Bridge and the Trans-Asian Highway — two infrastructure projects now under discussion in India. What is important to note is that despite internal political uncertainties which have blurred the vision of the South Asian nations, the importance of linking up the trade routes is very much on the agenda.

From strictly an infrastructure standpoint, the transit agreement between Nepal and Bangladesh is not a major achievement. The distance of the transit corridor, from Panitanki on the Nepal-India border, to Phulbari on the India-Bangladesh border, is only about 45 kilometers. To begin with, trucks in sealed containers will traverse this route.

But behind this rather un-spectacular achievement lies the all-important political will, lack of which had kept the South Asian nations in a constant state of diplomatic conflict. Observers claim that the kudos for opening this route belongs to Indian Prime Minister Inder K. Gujral, who, while visiting Kathmandu last June, had assured the Nepali authorities about opening this route.

Beside the trade flow, which is now of limited volume, the opening of the trade route ensures a whole set of positive developments for the future. The reason why the present trade between Nepal and Bangladesh is only \$20 million or so annually, is because of the poor infrastructure of both countries, Bangladesh in particular. The potential for a large volume of trade is very much there, and that means that both nations must get their heads together to improve their transportation networks to utilize and enhance the trade potential.

Second, due to misunderstandings that dominated the relationship among the South Asian nations for decades, every worsening of diplomatic relations between India and its neighbors provided fresh opportunities to bands of anti-social elements and insurgents to seek shelter in the bordering intransigent countries. This is a major problem in India's northeast, where a number of tribal-based secessionist-terrorist movements have exploited the cool, and sometimes hostile, diplomatic relations between India and Nepal, Bangladesh, and Myanmar.

Things began to change only this year, when New Delhi came to an agreement with Bangladesh for sharing the water of the Ganges River. Dhaka responded promptly by declaring that the anti-India militant groups, consisting of Assamese, Nagas, and other tribals, will be pushed across the border back into India. Subsequent reports indicate that Dhaka is keeping its promise.

A similar phenomenon was also observed along the India-Myanmar

border. Nagas live on both sides of the border, and many of them have taken up arms with the purpose of carving out a Greater Nagaland from India and Myanmar, against the wishes of both the countries. These secessionists, under pressure from the Indian Army, used to cross the border and move into the safe haven in Myanmar, well beyond the reach of the Yangon authorities. These Nagas also deal with drugs and weapons, posing a serious threat to the adjacent provinces of India.

Once India-Myanmar relations began to improve, the Yangon authorities, who are under a great deal of economic pressure from the West for their alleged violation of human rights of Myanmar citizens, welcomed the Indian gesture and began pushing back the warring Nagas from Myanmar soil. This act has been widely welcomed by authorities in New Delhi.

During his visit to Kathmandu, Indian Prime Minister Gujral was also assured by Nepali authorities that Kathmandu will not allow anti-India activities to take place in Nepal. At the same time, they also reminded the Indian prime minister that Kathmandu would like to settle with India a few issues which have nettled relations between the two countries over the years.

The issue that is in the forefront of people's minds in the government of Nepal, is a review of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed in 1950 by the two countries. The treaty, which gives heartburn to the majority of Nepalis and is the cause of the core of anti-India sentiments in Nepal, has little validity now, considering the vast political changes that have taken place internationally. Moreover, the treaty is primarily centered around India's own security concerns, while paying little attention to Nepal's needs.